

July 6, 2007

Gail Kimbell, Chief  
USDA Forest Service  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250-0003

Dear Chief Kimbell,

I write to you regarding the Ouachita National Forest, and your agency's efforts to implement Off-Highway Vehicle use regulations.

After reviewing outlines for the plan, I want to share my opposition to the current plan and urge you to consider the impact this decision could have on my state. For many years, hunters and outdoorsmen in Oklahoma have been able to enjoy their forest system freely. It has become home to some of the best hiking, fishing and hunting areas in southeast Oklahoma, and in recent years, an attractive site for OHV uses. Often, these activities go hand in hand, and for hunters especially, ATV usage is sometimes an integral part.

I take the rights of hunters and other outdoorsmen very seriously, as I am sure you do, and look forward to hearing how the Forest Service intends to protect these activities. While there may be a need for minimal OHV-use guidelines within the forest system, the trails-only approach appears overly restrictive and designed more for the few bad actors, than the general public who regularly enjoys the Ouachitas.

The vast majority of OHV users share your commitment to conservation, and in my experience, regularly lead the way when it comes to protecting our natural environment, and the many blessings that come with it.

Instead of viewing OHV users as a threat, as this plan does, I believe your efforts are better served when viewing them as one of your strongest allies. In Oklahoma, we see the Ouachitas as among the most beautiful and cherished resources we have and we are determined to preserve this rich heritage for our children and grandchildren. Recreation and conservation do not have to be in conflict. Unfortunately, I am fearful that this plan does just that.

I request two things: 1) A briefing so that I can more fully understand your efforts. I am particularly interested in hearing about the evidence you have gathered that demonstrates a need for restrictions, and any data you have that differentiates between soil types, terrain and other factors that may allow for greater OHV use in certain areas of the Ouachita system. It would also be helpful to hear how this effort compares to your experience within the Ouachita Forest in Arkansas and forests elsewhere; and 2) Consideration for a new framework for protection of the Ouachitas, that embraces the needs and efforts of local conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Tom A. Coburn, M.D.  
United States Senator